Male ruffed grouse create a drumming sound with their wings in spring to attract females.

ED BRY

The Grouse Woods

By Ron Wilson

We entered the Turtle Mountain timber with game bags weighted with shotgun shells and a bird hunter's certainty. We left a day later with the same amount of ammunition and the notion we'd spy a wolf wandering in from Canada before flushing a ruffed grouse.

The want for two prairie bird hunters to bag – or even see – their first ruffed grouse in North Dakota was strong. I've hunted and shot this bird in Minnesota, so I knew how difficult it could be to find grouse, let alone shoot one as it flew through cover thick enough to hold you upright if you tripped. I've also eaten this bird – hands down my choice for tastiest game bird – which is what made leaving the woods grouseless even more disappointing.

Yet, before we could unload shotguns, water the dog and tidy the vehicle for the trip back to Bismarck, a deal had been struck – we'd be back next fall. We'd been bitten by the ruffed grouse hunting bug that is as much about the country you hunt as the bird itself.

Ruffed grouse are found mainly in the Turtle Mountains and Pembina Hills where North Dakota rubs up against Canada. This country sports aspen woodlands the birds need for both food and cover. In a perfect world, these aspen forests are a confusion of different aged trees. Young aspens up to 10 years of age are favored by broods rummaging in the forest ground cover for insects. Middle-aged stands, 10-25 years, provide food and winter cover. Older trees, 25-40 years, are needed for resting, drumming during the spring mating season, and as a food source during late winter and early spring.

On our hunt for grouse last fall, we took the advice of hunters who had actually taken birds in the Turtle Mountains in the past, and found walking trails leading into the woods. The public trails, located on North Dakota Game and Fish Department wildlife management lands and State Forest Service tracts, were seemingly everywhere. They all looked inviting, while looking pretty much the same. To newcomers following hunting tips written in bad handwriting in the margins of maps and trying to recount what someone said days earlier, we pretty much picked the first trail we came to that offered space to park our vehicle, and set out on foot.

Fifty yards – and a few twists and turns – down the trail and it seemed as if we walked into a room in which someone had quietly shut the door behind us. Ducks spooked from a small wetland barely visible through the trees sounded as if their noisy retreat originated in our boot prints. Animal sounds – a white-tailed deer blowing its warning – quickly lost on the open, windy prairie were amplified in our tree-filled "room."

The trail, which forked once, then twice, gave the impression it went on for miles, ending somewhere in Canada where the Turtle Mountains gave way to prairie. With shotguns resting on shoulders or cradled in arms, we felt as if we could have walked its entire length, leaving the trail occasionally to push a piece of cover that looked like it might hold birds.

For all the bushwhacking we did, however, we might as well have been carrying sticks for weapons. It was too enjoyable to stay on the trail in country so foreign to us, wondering what we might run into around the next bend in our path – the forest giving way to a

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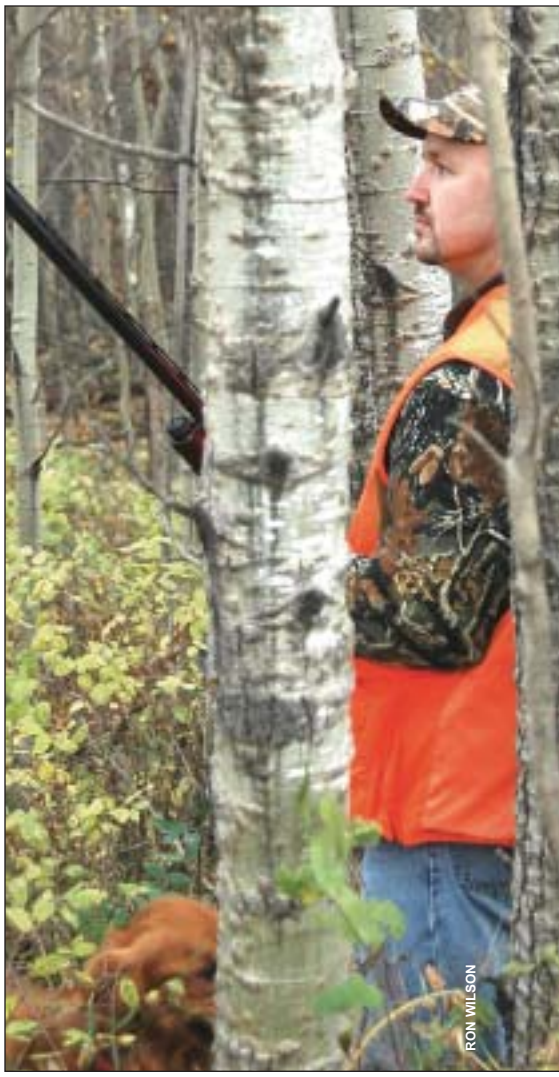
One bird in the game bag at the end of day of hunting is a good day spent in ruffed grouse country. Inset: A spent shotgun shell is the only proof of other ruffed grouse hunters in the Turtle Mountains in early fall 2005.

Greg Freeman, Bismarck, wanders off trail in hopes of flushing an elusive ruffed grouse in the Turtle Mountains in 2005.



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small meadow, moose tracks the size of rodeo belt buckles pressed into mud, or maybe, just maybe, a ruffed grouse flushing at our arrival into a gigantic shooting lane cleared by the hands of hunting gods.

Instead, we found a spent shotgun shell at the edge of the trail that we hoped was used on a grouse that was unable to put a tree between it and the hunter.

Ruffed grouse populations run in cycles, building to a high every 8-10 years. Even at their peak, ruff numbers never rival those of native sharp-tailed grouse, or exotic ring-necked pheasants, for example, because the type of habitat the forest birds require is in short supply in North Dakota. For those hunters who have tasted the hunting experience – and literally, the grouse itself – bird numbers aren't a huge concern. Whether ruffed grouse are climbing out of a low in the cycle or are at a high, the ruffed grouse hunter's autumn agenda is the same – spend time in the woods.

For some, it's been said their hunting season isn't complete without at least one trip to the grouse woods in fall. I can understand this, even though I'm nowhere near qualified to call myself a ruffed grouse hunter. I get what these veteran hunters seek – solitude, experiencing the brilliant change in flora as summer slides into autumn, the spike in confidence once the leaves fall, giving the hunter more of an edge in spotting game, and the feel of a couple of dead birds in the game bag pressing against the small of your back as you exit the woods.

If you're a ruffed grouse hunter in North Dakota, you can't help but smile at your situation. In terms of competition in the woods – at least when you compare it to the number of hunters who chase the more publicized ring-necked pheasant – there isn't much. In 2005, for instance, fewer than 850 hunters took to the woods, harvesting about 912 birds.

To bag a ruffed grouse is to take a native, a bird that has adapted over time to the sometimes cruelties of life outdoors on the Northern Plains. In winter, this bird burrows into the snow to escape wind and freezing temperatures. Come spring, males liven the woods with a unique drumming sound that is reminiscent of an old tractor that just can't seem to get started.

The male drums with wings to proclaim his territory to competitors and relay his whereabouts to females. Twice daily, this serenade takes place on a favored log, and females visit different males before selecting a mate. After breeding, she leaves to begin nesting at the base of a tree.

Life goes on in the grouse woods, and we promised we'd be back to catch up in fall.

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GREG LINK

Ruffed grouse hunters never know when they'll stumble upon woodcock, another bird that can test the hunter's shooting skills.

Consider Woody

Don't forget the woodcock when hunting North Dakota's woods. Since this migratory game bird is commonly found in habitat favored by ruffed grouse, be on the ready.

North Dakota held its first woodcock – aka woody, timberdoodle, wood snipe and bog sucker – season a decade ago. Ruffed grouse hunters in the Turtle Mountains and Pembina Hills requested the hunting opportunity after repeated woody flushes.

The woodcock is tough to hit on the wing thanks to some nifty zigzagging in the air. Veteran hunters will tell you the bird holds well to a pointing dog, and will typically head for an opening in the trees when flushed, so the hunter can sometimes ready himself before it erupts from cover.

Woodcock fly under the radar in terms of popularity among North Dakota wing shooters. Fewer than 100 birds are shot per year in the state.

The woodcock's plumage is sort of a dead leaf pattern, which works well for the bird when trying to avoid predators while feeding on the forest floor. It has large, bulging eyes near the back of its head and has a long bill for unearthing earthworms, its chief food source.

Walking trails on North Dakota Game and Fish Department and State Forest Service lands offers plenty of opportunities for hunters to wander in search of ruffed grouse in the Turtle Mountains.

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